

The Alexander Thomson Society NEWSLETTER

Nº18, February 1997

Bell Street falls

ONE OF a pair of 1876 Thomson & Turnbull warehouses in the heart of Glasgow, about which the Society has long expressed concern, has been demolished.

Shortly after the publication of our last *Newsletter*, in the week beginning on Monday December 1st, the handsome Grecian warehouse in Bell Street of 1876, which was either a posthumous work by Thomson and/or his partner Turnbull was demolished by order of Glasgow City Council following the serving of a dangerous buildings notice. This loss to the city secured considerable publicity in *The Herald* (December 3rd, 5th, 9th, 16th, 17th, 21st, etc.) and elsewhere.

As the Society's Chairman Gavin Stamp pointed out in his letters to *The Herald*, it is not as if we did not see this coming. For almost as long as the Alexander Thomson Society has been in existence, we have been warning the city of the deteriorating condition of the Bell Street and Watson Street warehouses. With Bell Street, its condition finally reached a point where something clearly had to be done. What is so frustrating is that



we had thought that a rehabilitation scheme was at last going ahead.

The building had been bought by Federal Securities in 1995. It transpired, however, that this firm had no assets to carry out a rehabilitation scheme and that the owner was, in fact, a registered bankrupt. There are, however, some puzzling aspects to this business. Mr Robert Thomson (no relation) maintains that he had complied with earlier requests by Building Control officers to make the building safe and that he needed more time to comply with further demands made on November 21st than the November 29th deadline given. And on November 29th the building was taken over by Building Control. Was this action too

precipitate?

What, of course, is intolerable is that the historic architectural assets of Glasgow

should be in the hands of delinquents. The Council has the power of Compulsory Purchase but will not exercise this power unless a back-to-back agreement with a developer to take on the threatened building is sealed in advance. At a time of financial stringency, this is perhaps understandable. We must applaud the action taken by the Council to save Egyptian Halls while regretting that similar action was not taken over the Bell Street warehouse: after all, having been derelict for years, its value cannot have been high. Preserving the city's historic buildings – a finite and precious resource – requires political will, and it is that will which seems to be lacking.

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Bell Street falls

The other, and larger block by Thomson and/or Turnbull in Watson Street survives however, in slightly less parlous condition. It is essential that this is saved, if only for the reputation of Glasgow. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, to lose one of the Bell Street and Watson Street warehouses may be a tragedy, but to lose both looks like carelessness. A Section 13 – Dangerous Structure – notice (running for 60 days from February 4th) has now been served on the owners of this building which, we hope, will concentrate their minds and enable something positive to happen.

The Council itself is a part-owner, but the majority owner is Mr Barry Clapham, who claims that he has sold it to the same Mr Thomson but that the conditions have not been fulfilled. We are pleased to learn, however, that an independent structural assessment reveals that the Watson Street warehouse is not in such parlous condition as maintained by the city's zealous Building Control officers,



and that the Glasgow Buildings Preservation Trust is involved in the problem of trying to put a rehabilitation and development package together.

We have long maintained that the Bell Street and Watson Street warehouses were a key part of any attempt to rehabilitate Glasgow Cross, whose present condition is a disgrace. We are therefore dismayed to find that the proposals by the Gray Aitken Partnership for GAP Housing on the empty quadrant site at the bottom of the High Street are utterly mediocre and unworthy of the site and its neighbours. We have therefore indicated our opposition to this scheme to the Director of Planning.

On a more optimistic note, our own Roger Guthrie has saved the stones of the handsome central entrance (*left*) of the demolished Bell Street block, and hopes to re-erect them on part of the warehouse site opposite. One day, perhaps, if sanity prevails, they might be re-used on a replica facade in Bell Street.

Cases

Holmwood

We are pleased to report that restoration work at Holmwood by Hunter & Clark, builders, under Page & Park, architects, has at last begun. The first phase is to repair the stable block as a caretaker's house and garage, and to reconstruct that crucial connecting wall with the main house. All structural work at Holmwood should be completed before 1999.

Eton Terrace, Oakfield Avenue

It is depressing to learn that attempts by the Glasgow West End Conservation Trust, through its Community Liaison panel, to get the owners of this magnificent but deteriorating Thomson terrace to agree together on a conservation programme have failed. Yet again, it seems the only way to save Glasgow's historic architecture must be to threaten compulsory purchase, with a Housing Association or Building Preservation Trust as the back-up to take the terrace on. We shall encourage the City Council to take whatever action is necessary.

St Vincent Street Church

There is slow progress with the putative St Vincent Street Church Trust. Meanwhile, the World Monuments Fund based in New York is seriously considering putting this Thomson building on its annual List of 100 Most Endangered Sites in the world.

ANNUAL FOREIGN JAUNT

AS ANNOUNCED in the last *Newsletter*, this year's trip will be to LEEDS and will take place on the weekend nearest to Thomson's birthday, that is, from **Friday, 11th April to Sunday, 13th April**.

Our guides in Leeds will be the architectural journalist and conservationist, Kenneth Powell, and his wife, Dr Sue Powell. Leeds is rich in architecture, both Classic and Gothic. We will have a full tour of the city centre, looking in particular at the extraordinary Marshall Mills designed in the Egyptian style by Joseph Bonomi as well as the magnificent Victorian Classical buildings by Cuthbert Broderick: the Town Hall and the Corn Exchange. Leeds is also notable for its covered markets and arcades, as well as for good Gothic Revival churches. There should also be an opportunity to see the new Royal Armouries museum.

As always, we have tried to keep the cost to a minimum. We have been offered a very good rate at the QUEEN'S HOTEL, the grand 1930s railway hotel in the heart of the city, for bed, breakfast AND dinner for two nights. So the total cost, including a round trip by rail, should be no more

than £135 for sharing a double room and £145 for a single room.

The plan is to leave Glasgow Central on the Friday on the 14.00 hours train, changing at York to arrive in Leeds at 18.03. On Saturday we will examine the centre of Leeds. On Sunday morning we will first travel to SALTAIRE north of Bradford, the model town built by Sir Titus Salt around his huge alpaca mill in the 1850s. We shall see the Congregational Church by Lockwood & Mawson as well as the mill, now an extraordinary emporium run by Jonathan Silver. Then we shall catch the train at Shipley in the early afternoon to cross the Pennines on the SETTLE & CARLISLE – one of the most spectacular railway journeys in Britain which once formed part of the Midland Railway's route from London St Pancras to Glasgow St Enoch. After changing at Carlisle, we shall arrive back at Glasgow Central at 18.30.

We can only organise these annual jaunts if enough of our members come to make it worthwhile. This trip promises to be rich in architecture, and the Chairman therefore hopes you will support this event if you possibly can.

Photographs from Graham Law's 1950 Thomson Thesis

THE PHOTOGRAPHS reproduced here of Busby House and of the Grosvenor Building in Gordon Street – an extraordinary image showing it gutted by fire either in the early 1860s or before its top was added in 1907 – are from fine prints by Annan which come from the late Graham Law's Cambridge dissertation on Thomson written in 1950. We were very pleased to be presented with an original copy of this dissertation by Dr Mark Girouard, and we have deposited it at the National Monuments Record in Edinburgh.

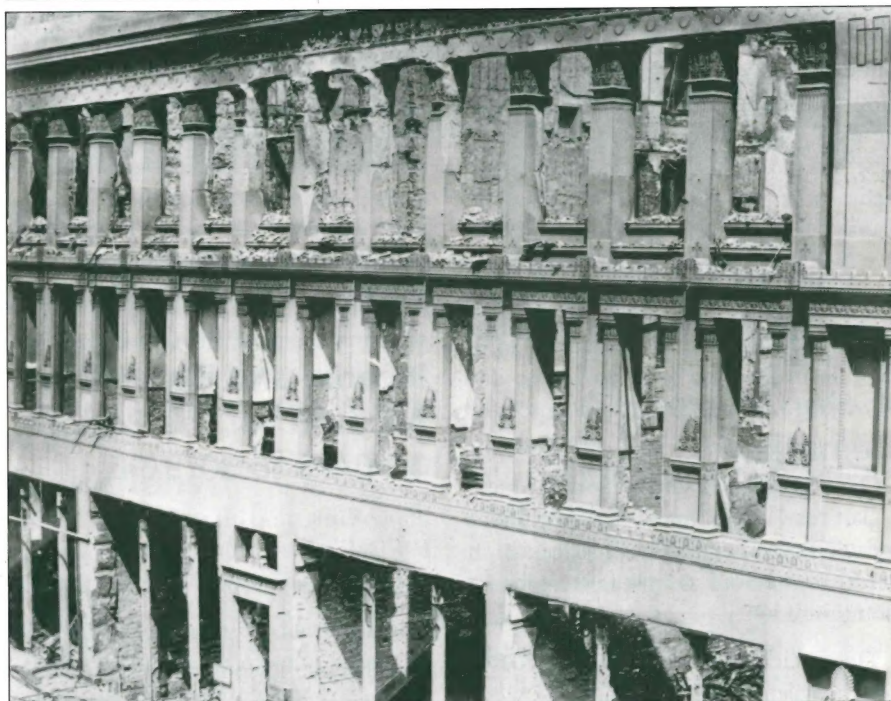
Law's text is essentially that published in the *Architectural Review* in May 1954, but this copy is valuable as it is illustrated by good prints from photographs which seem since to have disappeared. We shall reproduce more in future numbers of this *Newsletter*.

Know of a Thomson illustration?

THE SOCIETY is always happy to be told of photographs of Thomson buildings, whether previously unpublished or turning up in out of the way works. If you do discover a possibly unknown illustration of Thomson himself, or of a Thomson work, please send details of the publication in which it is located (author, title, publisher, date of publication and edition), together with a photocopy if possible, to the Chairman at the Society's address. If you possess or know of unpublished photographs of Thomson exteriors or interiors, the Society will be happy to pay for copies to be made for our records.

Thomson on the Net

Internet users can find reference to 'Greek' Thomson in *Architecture on Disk*, a CD tour of Glasgow's buildings from Colloquium. Look up: <http://www.colloquium.co.uk/www/aod/greek.htm>



For Sale: Thomson's first commission

SEYMOUR LODGE at Cove, Dumbartonshire, is currently for sale. Built in 1850 and overlooking the Firth of Clyde, Seymour Lodge is Thomson's first authenticated commission. Although it is Gothic, or Tudor, rather than Greek in style, Thomson must have been pleased with his design as he chose to illustrate it in 1868 in *Villa and Cottage Architecture*. For further details, contact Macintosh Humble, Solicitors & Notaries, 21 High Street, Dumbarton G82 1LT. Tel: 01389 763491.

Minutes of the 6th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

held on Wednesday, 27th November 1996 at 42 Miller Street, Glasgow

Present:

Approximately 80 members including various members of the Society's Committee.

1. Apologies.

Jane Sheffield, Adam Swan.

2. Minutes.

The Minutes of the Fifth A.G.M. were circulated at the meeting and approved unanimously.

3. Chairman's Remarks

The Society was happy to hold its AGM at the recently restored Tobacco Laird's House. The Scottish Civic Trust would shortly be moving their offices to the building but there would still be space available for meetings and events such as the recent exhibition on Glasgow churches. The magnificent chimney-piece from Castlemilk House which is on display has alluded to, albeit that the 17th Cy attribution was improbable, the middle of last century being much more likely. Since our previous AGM there were some achievements to report but there was no cause for complacency. The Chairman appealed for more volunteers to serve on the Committee and to undertake specific tasks such as the conservation of a particular building.

4. Hon. Secretary's Remarks

Our total membership is about the same as last year. The payment of subscriptions by standing order had been successful in terms of renewals as well as in reducing administration.

The Society aims to publish three or four newsletters each year and the meeting was asked for a show of hands to indicate if regular, smaller editions were preferred to irregular but more substantial ones. The meeting favoured the latter.

The Society is considering delivering leaflets to homes in, say, the South Side, to publicise Thomson buildings in that area and to attract new members. Also under consideration is Thomson merchandise, such as mugs and postcards, for sale to the public.

Since its foundation in 1991 the Society has made considerable progress in influencing the saving and renovation of the surviving buildings and in research into Thomson's life. Alexander Thomson's importance is that his ideas have a continuing relevance to our own times and that the Society seeks to communicate this to as wide a public as possible.

5. Hon. Treasurer's Remarks

The Society's finances remain in good shape. Annual subscriptions pay for the Newsletters and our usual balance is £6,000 to £8,000.

The subscription income of approximately £3,700 equates to 370 members each paying the standard £10 fee. Approximately one-third of this income is received by standing order with the balance being paid by cheque.

The miscellaneous income and expenditure shown in the accounts (see below) represented the Newcastle trip. Due to a timing difference the Society had paid for four newsletters during the year as compared with two the previous year. The Exhibition Expenses of £810 included

exceptional expenditure of £500 arising from the RIAS exhibition at Rutland Square. Including the exceptional expenditure the deficit for the year was £724.55 leaving a balance of £7,204 to be carried forward.

Since the year end £500 has been donated to the National Trust Holmwood appeal. The Income and Expenditure Account for the Period 01.10.1995 to 30.09.1996 was circulated at the meeting and approved unanimously.

6. Cases

Members were kept informed of Cases in each newsletter. The Society exists to focus attention on Alexander Thomson's neglected buildings but without exception this is a very slow process. The Chairman gave the example of a recent meeting to discuss the future of Rockland at which he and Mark Baines had represented the Society.

a) St Vincent Street Church. The charitable trust cannot be established formally until BT declare their intentions concerning Heron House, the adjacent concrete office building which is to be demolished.

Continued on next page

Income and Expenditure Account for the Period 1/10/95 to 30/9/96

INCOME	
Subscriptions	£3,470 00
Donations	£142.00
Miscellaneous Income	£2,188.44
Bank Interest	£234 83
	£6,035.27
EXPENDITURE	
Printing, Stationery Postages	£3,739 73
Miscellaneous Expenditure	2,210 09
Exhibition Expenses	810 00
	£6,759 82
	(724.55)

Balance Sheet as at 30/9/96

ASSETS	
Balance at Bank	£7,204.77
FUNDS	
Balance carried forward	7,929 32
Less: Deficit for year	(724 55)
	£7,204.77

Notes:

1 Subscription Income is taken into the accounts on receipt.

2) Bank interest is taken in when credited.

*Dr S. McKinstry
Hon. Treasurer*

St Vincent Street and the Temple of Solomon

PROFESSOR JAMES STEVENS CURL FSA responds to DR SAM MCKINSTRY in the continuing discussion about significance in Thomson's ecclesiastical architecture, and Dr McKinstry makes his reply...

SAM MCKINSTRY'S usual dismissive response to my views on St Vincent Street church [*Newsletter* N°17, November 1996] requires a brief reply from me.

I have proposed various (to me) reasonable suggestions (they are no more) about Thomson's ecclesiastical architecture (as well as some ideas about living- and dining-room decorations).

McKinstry has not responded to some interesting points I raised. The cyclopean and pseudo-isodomic masonry at the Caledonia Road church must be there for a purpose: after all, the plinth of cyclopean masonry is so subtle most people miss it, but it is a complicated business to make. Pseudo-isodomic masonry occurs at St Vincent Street too.

Yes, the Tau cross was indeed adopted by the early Church, but (and why cannot McKinstry accept something that is well-known and documented?) it also represents the Temple. Why can it not represent both? After all the Church and the Temple were not unconnected.

The Tau cross on the South Kensington design (I agree it was probably the Natural History Museum rather than the V&A, and I am sorry for this minor error) is near the top of a tower that partly resembles Charles Wilson's Free Church College tower in Glasgow, but at the very top is a lighthouse lantern, probably referring to the Pharos and to Enlightenment and learning (a Masonic symbol, let it be noted). Why should not a new high-minded museum be a Temple

(be it of Arts, Sciences, Natural History, or whatever) of Knowledge? And why should it not beam its messages outwards?

Finally, there are those amazing capitals inside St Vincent Street church. I suggest they are an attempt to re-create the 'chapiters' of the Temple by giving them an approximately Middle-Eastern appearance as opposed to a Classical form.

I still consider that, as Thomson clearly believed architecture could express religious (and other) ideas (as is obvious from the Haldane Lectures, which I have read, and know, thank you very much), it is not impossible that he expressed religious and mnemonic notions in his own work. The embracing of Old and New Testament themes in his ecclesiastical buildings does not seem to me to be a problem. I am sorry Sam McKinstry seems to think it is.

Sam McKinstry replies:

Readers of Professor Curl's final pronouncement on St Vincent Street Church will perhaps be surprised that its author now claims that his (Masonic) Temple interpretation of the building was never more than "reasonable suggestions". I would remind readers that in *Newsletter* N°14, he states that the church "is not only a mnemonic of the Lost Ideal, it IS the reconstructed Temple in Glasgow"! I welcome this dramatic softening of attitude, even if he does not recognise that it has taken place.

I do not, however, welcome his closing statement that I think the church is incapable of embracing both Old and New Testament themes. Of course it is, and I made this quite clear in *Newsletter* N° 11, when I identified the cherubim figures on the belfry stage of the tower.

Finally, while it is perfectly possible that layers of symbolism may co-exist in the church, all the written evidence points to an overriding Christian purpose in the building's design, entirely consistent with the devout architect who emerges from the primary source documents that survive. I rest my case.

Minutes of the 6th Annual General Meeting

Continued from the previous page

b) Caledonia Road Church. Diverting the road to the west and demolishing the disused railway viaduct are ideas which now seem to have gained general acceptance. The Iona Community continue to be seriously interested in occupying a restored building.

c) Egyptian Halls. The Compulsory Purchase Order for the upper storey has gone through unopposed and emergency repairs are being made. Nevertheless it is disappointing that Historic Scotland are unable to make funds for renovation available during this current year.

d) Holmwood. The European Regional Development Fund had approved a contribution to the restoration which is expected to start shortly.

7. Activities

As usual a series of lectures will be held during the winter and a trip will be organised to coincide with Thomson's birthday in April. The intention this year

is to visit Leeds. The Chairman drew attention to the difficulty of knowing what members wanted and asked members to contribute ideas and suggestions for activities.

8. Elections

The Chairman said that additional nominations in order to enlarge the Committee would be welcome.

The following were elected: Honorary Secretary: Dominic d'Angelo; Honorary Treasurer: Irene Stewart; Honorary Minutes Secretary: Pam Painter; Committee: Mary Miers, Michael Davis, Sam McKinstry, Graeme Shearer.

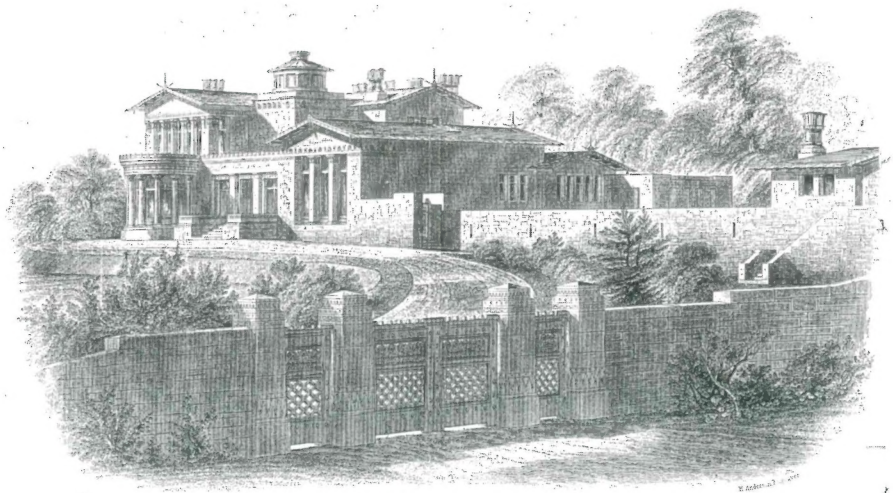
Following the end of the AGM, Sarah Gaventa, Director of Communications for the Glasgow 1999 Company gave a well-received talk on the aims, objectives and limitations of Glasgow 1999, and answered questions from the audience, after which the Chairman proposed a vote of thanks.

At once classic and picturesque..."

Gavin Stamp explores the originality of Thomson's Holmwood

THE HOLMWOOD Villa," wrote Thomas Gildard in 1888, "...has deprived us of either asking or answering the question, Is an architect an artist? If architecture be poetry in stone-and-lime – a great temple an epic – this exquisite little gem, at once classic and picturesque, is as complete, self-contained, and polished as a sonnet."¹

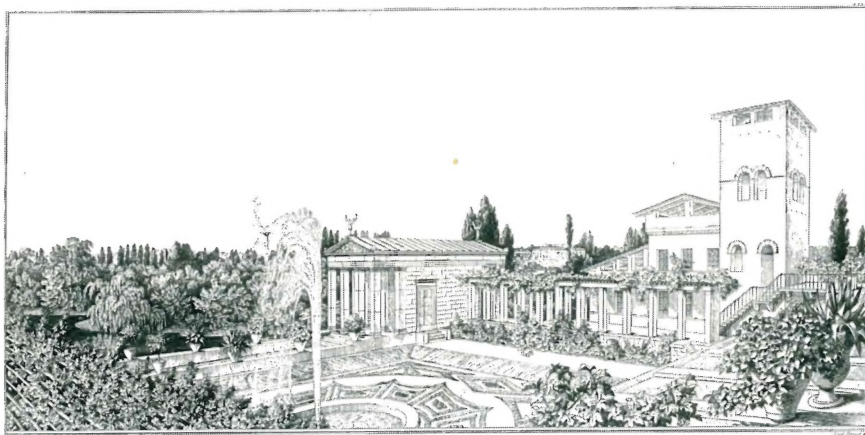
Gildard, in this familiar quotation, stressed the uniqueness of Holmwood. For it is not just exceptional in a Glasgow context; it is remarkable by any standards, and the reason for this was clearly understood by Thomson's obituarist and admirer. This villa, Gildard observed, is "at once classic and picturesque" and that is extraordinarily rare. In European terms, of course, the asymmetry of Holmwood



Perspective of Holmwood, from Villa and Cottage Architecture, 1868

suburban detached house between Schinkel and Frank Lloyd Wright, for the resemblances between the early houses of the Prairie School and Thomson's horizontally massed design, with its low pitched gables and spreading eaves – together with that connecting garden wall

his other characteristic villas. I cannot think of any other example of an asymmetrically composed Neo-Classical or Greek Revival detached house contemporary with Holmwood and the only immediate precedents would seem to be Greco-Italianate villas by such architects as Decimus Burton and W.H. Playfair as well as the remarkable designs for farm buildings made by Soane's assistant, J.M. Gandy, much earlier in the century.



The Court Gardener's House at Potsdam by K. F. Schinkel, from the Sammlung Architektonischer Entwürfe, 1840

can be related to the published designs for villas by K.F. Schinkel, which Thomson certainly knew: in particular, to the design for the Court Gardener's House with the Roman Baths at Potsdam. And it is now, perhaps, conventional to see this villa in Cathcart as marking an important stage in the evolution of the

which Gildard recognised as being "one of the most important parts of the composition" – have often been remarked on.

But what has largely escaped comment in the considerable literature on the history of villa design is the uniqueness in British architecture of Thomson's picturesque treatment of Holmwood and of

It is important to make a distinction here between *Italianate* villas, like Thomas Hope's Deepdene – which were, by definition, picturesque and asymmetrical – and Neo-Classical ones. Greek Revival houses which are asymmetrically composed – rather than having a symmetrical core with a wing attached – would seem to be very rare indeed before the 1850s in Britain (oddly, the asymmetrical precedent provided by the Erechtheum on the Acropolis seems to have been ignored). But there were some which were somewhat Grecian: David Walker has pointed out that "the relevance of [W.H.] Playfair's work to Thomson's lies not so much in his great public buildings as in the Germanic classical-Italianate houses he designed in 1828-9 – Belmont, Corstorphine, Dunphail, Morayshire and Drumbanagher, Armagh, only the first of

which Thomson is likely to have seen – and the Italianate villa of Dalcrue farmhouse on the Lynedoch estate in Perthshire, designed in 1832.”²

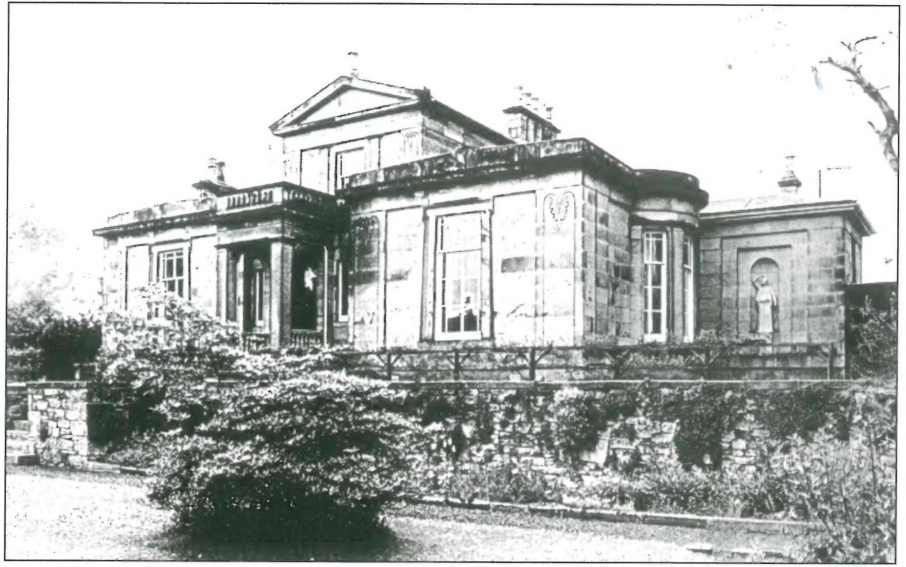
Furthermore, Italianate asymmetry had been combined with Grecian detail on



The Lansdown Tower at Bath by H.E. Goodridge, from Views of Lansdown Tower, 1844

the celebrated Lansdown Tower at Bath, designed for William Beckford by H.E. Goodridge and built in 1824-27, for although there are round arches at ground level the tall campanile is topped with a version of the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates. And there was at least one villa in the group designed by Decimus Burton at Calverley Park in Tunbridge Wells after 1828 which was as much Grecian as Italianate in style and was asymmetrically massed.³ But whether Thomson knew of many or any of such buildings cannot, of course, be determined.

Picturesque villas were commonplace by the early 19th century – a consequence of the stream of illustrated books of designs for villas and cottages which came from the presses. Early books are exclusively concerned with Classical designs in the



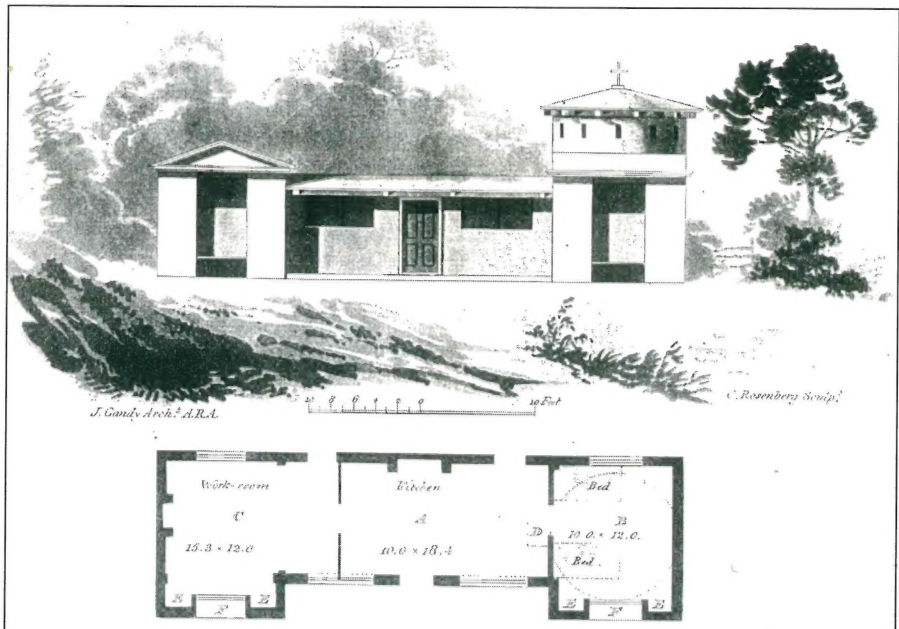
Arthur Lodge, Edinburgh, by Thomas Hamilton, 1830

Palladian tradition, but by the end of the 18th century, inspired by the taste for the Picturesque, some architects were trying to escape the straightjacket of axial symmetry by illustrating less formal compositions. James Malton's *Essay on British Cottage Architecture* of 1798, say, or W.F. Pocock's book of *Architectural Designs for Rustic Cottages, Picturesque Dwellings, Villas &c.* of 1807 contain asymmetrical plans for small houses but the elevations are always Gothic or Tudor in style. As late as 1842, Richard Brown's pedestrian designs in his book on *Domestic Architecture* are all symmetrical except for the 'Anglo-Italian' house and his curious 'Pompeian Suburban Villa'.

In fact, a clear pattern emerges: asymmetrical villas are Gothic, Tudor or rustic in style and are essentially *cottages ornées* while Classical (as opposed to Italianate)

villas are invariably symmetrical. That John B. Papworth, in his *Rural Residences* of 1818, should include 'A Villa designed as the Residence of an Artist' which was vaguely Grecian and self-consciously picturesque, and that his former assistant, James Thomson (no relation), in his *Rural Retreats* of 1827, should illustrate an 'Irregular House' in a Grecian manner are surely exceptions that prove the rule.⁴ All such publications only serve to emphasise the originality of Thomson's achievement. Even American pattern books, like those by Minard Lafever by which Thomson was probably influenced, always depict Grecian villas as symmetrical.⁵

Alexander Thomson himself would seem to have understood how unusual his asymmetrical design for Holmwood was. The accompanying text to the plates of

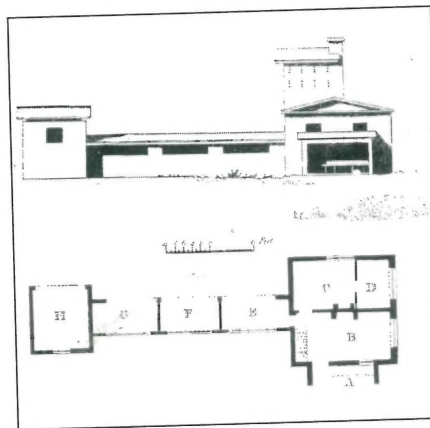
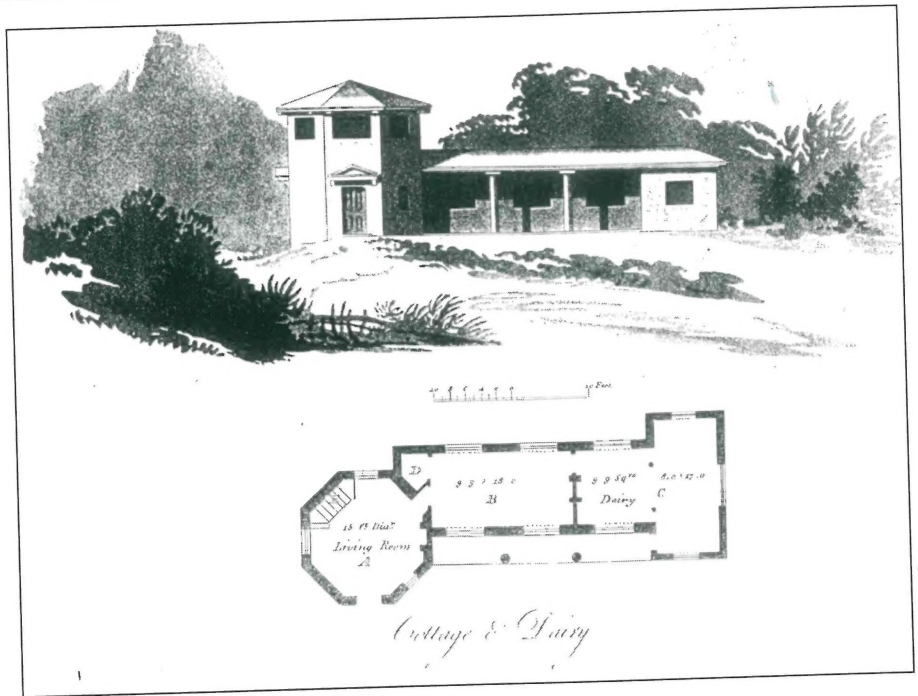


Designs for farm buildings by J.M. Gandy, from Designs for Cottages and The Rural Architect, 1805

the villa in the book on *Villa and Cottage Architecture* published by Blackie a decade later – and almost certainly contributed by the architect – noted that, “The style of the architecture is an adaptation of the Greek. Country houses in this style usually consist of one cubical mass, with sometimes a wing on each side. In the present case the building is picturesquely treated, and is composed of several masses, varying in size and character, each part designed to express externally its purpose in the general plan.”⁶

In fact, what Thomson was doing was not just indulging in a picturesque design appropriate to a landscaped rural setting but also demonstrating that Gothic Revival or Puginian concerns about freedom in plan and its external expression could also be realised in the trabeated language of the Greeks. For Thomson continued that, “The aim, in the design, may be said to be exemplified in the following elements of the composition:— first, the dining room distinguished by largeness of proportion, loftiness, and simplicity; second, the parlour, the usual sitting room, provided with a large projecting circular window, commanding a comprehensive view... third, the drawing room in the upper floor, rendered equally unmistakable by the extent and arrangement of its multiple window; and, fourth, the circular lantern over the principal staircase, which is the central feature of the design...” In contrast, the conventional Classical villa – in both England and Scotland – contrive to place two similar reception rooms either side of a central entrance so to make a balanced, symmetrical facade. Particularly good examples in Scotland are Arthur Lodge in Edinburgh, probably by Thomas Hamilton, and Belmont in Corstophine by W.H. Playfair, an architect who was always concerned to design his houses to fit a particular landscape.

Holmwood, built in 1857-58 for a paper manufacturer on a rural site by the White Water of Cart just a few miles from Glasgow, is essentially a prototype for a new model of suburban villa. After it, in Glasgow and elsewhere, many examples can be found of asymmetrical suburban



Above and left: Designs for farm buildings by J.M. Gandy, from *Designs for Cottages and The Rural Architect*, 1805

tempt, but it seems to me that behind these walls the villa still functions because its scale is as capable of reduction as of Hadrianic expansion.⁸ We still need a comprehensive study of the Victorian villa and, in it, Thomson's achievement would surely loom large.

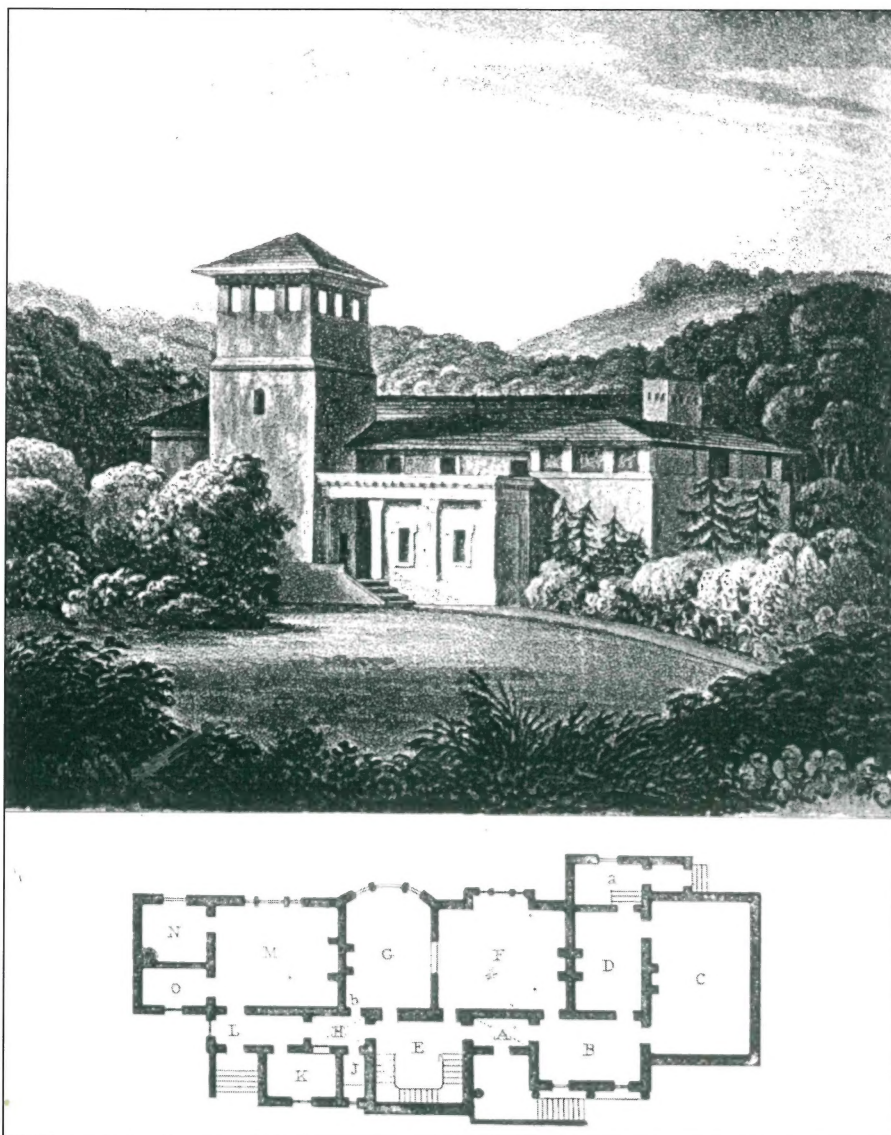
houses in a Classical style – Pollokshields is full of them – yet, apart from Thomson's own other essays in picturesque composition, it would seem to have no immediate precedent. All the more remarkable, therefore, that the importance of this design has not been recognised by many historians although – typically – Goodhart-Rendel long ago realised that “some villas designed by Alexander Thomson... are as interesting as any that of [sic] the nineteenth century produced.”⁷ This, perhaps, is because most of the literature on villas is concerned with the legacy of Palladio, with the aristocratic villa of the Georgian period rather than with that fundamental and characteristic building type of the 19th century, the middle-class villa or suburban house. Yet again, the blinkered snobbery of so much architectural history distorts our understanding. Ian Gow recognised this when he wrote in his essay in the recent compilation on *The Georgian Villa* that, “sadly, many contributors to this volume have dismissed the Victorian villa as such a pale shadow of an aristocratic tradition as to be beneath con-

Thomson, we gather, had a good library and as he travelled little he clearly relied on architectural publications for inspiration. It must have been through German publications that he became familiar with the work of the German Neo-Classacists and Thomson's debt to Schinkel is surely indisputable. We know that, in 1863, he presented a copy of the *Sammlung Architektonischer Entwürfe* to the Glasgow Architectural Society⁹ and the plates showing Schinkel's design for the Court Gardener's House at Potsdam, with its low-pitched roofs with wide eaves and picturesque arrangement of Classical elements, had first been published in 1840 and may well have influenced Thomson's villas. However, as David Watkin also points out, German architects were themselves inspired by English picturesque designs. Watkin also suggests other German precedents for Thomson's villas, notably designs by Leo von Klenze in his own *Sammlung Architektonischer Entwürfe* which appeared after 1830 and projects by Schinkel's collaborator, Ludwig Persius, and by J. Emmerich published in the *Architektonisches Skizzenbuch* after 1852.¹⁰

What is less obvious and more tantalising are possible British precedents for the use of a manner at once Classic and Picturesque. In the frustrating absence of a catalogue to his library, we cannot know if Thomson knew two volumes of most remarkable designs by Sir John's Soane's extraordinary draughtsman, J.M. Gandy (although we do know that Playfair owned a copy). These were *Designs for Cottages, Cottage Farms and other Rural Buildings...* and *The Rural Architect, consisting of various Designs for Country Buildings*, both published in 1805. The humble buildings illustrated – apparently to be erected in *pise* – are in an astonishingly severe and abstract Neo-Classical manner and, with their pronounced horizontality and very-low pitched roofs, seem to look forward to Thomson and beyond – they are, as John Summerson once put it, “sharp prophesies of functionalism and cubism.”¹²

And what, for our present purpose, is particularly interesting is that many of these designs are asymmetrically massed. “It is a question submitted to the Public,” wrote Gandy in his introduction to the first volume, “whether Architectural Designs, in general, should be uniform, that is, having corresponding parts on each side of a centre; or whether they should be composed of parts dissimilar, though harmonious... Uniform buildings have but one point of view from whence their parts are corresponding; from every other point they fall into the picturesque by the change of perspective, which is an argument drawn from Nature, that the picturesque is the most beautiful; but is more difficult to manage, and requires the same sort of skill and genius as fine music.”¹³ As Summerson suggested in his essay on this architect visionary, Gandy “was consciously attempting to do in architecture what Wordsworth had, some years previously, done in poetry – to explode the gentility of architecture, to rediscover some of the virtue of humble and rustic life, and to express them in design.”¹⁴

But Gandy was not, of course, the first to apply Picturesque principles to design-



‘A Villa designed as the Residence of an Artist’ by John B. Papworth, from *Rural Residences*, 1818

ing Classical houses. That honour lies with John Nash, the architect principally associated with the evolution of the asymmetrical Italianate villa. The turning point was Cronkhill, the country house in Shropshire built in c.1802. Here was “purposeful asymmetry” but not in the Gothic manner hitherto associated with the Picturesque. For Cronkhill was, as Summerson put it, “a new departure altogether. The round tower is not a Gothic castle tower but the tower, perhaps, of an old Italian *castello* which has been made into a villa or a farm... There had been nothing quite like this in English architecture but it is not difficult to account

for it. One thinks of Payne Knight’s speculations on the architecture appropriate to the Picturesque...”¹⁵ And what Payne Knight had advocated was, “that mixed style which characterises the buildings of Claude and Poussin” so that, in fact, Cronkhill and its many successors were literally Picturesque – like buildings in pictures. But neither Claude nor Poussin ever depicted anything like Holmwood in their landscapes.

Among the plethora of publications about villas and cottages, the most important and influential was surely the *Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture...* by the Scottish architect and

garden designer, John Claudius Loudon, which first appeared in 1833. A villa, for Loudon, was, "a country residence with land attached, a portion of which, surrounding the house, is laid out as a pleasure ground; or, in other words, with a view to recreation and enjoyment, more



than profit;" and a substantial portion of the book was devoted to the "principles for designing villas," with examples. Loudon made it clear that he personally preferred the Gothic to the Greek, and, when describing his "Beau Ideal of an English Villa," he indicated, "a preference to the mixed style of Architecture, called the old English style, for a gentleman's residence in the country. For instance, it is more picturesque and ornamental; it accords best with rural scenery; and, as it admits of great irregularity of form, it affords space for the various offices and conveniences necessary in a country-house. It is also, I think, better suited to our climate than the Grecian style, which requires porticoes, projecting cornices, and windows of moderate size, &c.; all of which circumstances tend to make the house gloomy, and intercept the light."¹⁶

Loudon did not, however, rule out the Greek entirely as, "The Fitness of a Style for Accommodation, Comfort and Convenience may naturally be supposed to influence our judgements in respect to its external effect; but in this point of view, our belief is that the Grecian, Gothic, and Italian styles are altogether equal." And he was even prepared – in theory – to see it picturesquely treated: "It is true, that if we consider it necessary that the Grecian style, when adopted in the country, should be as essentially symmetrical as it is, when applied to temples, there will be an end, at once, of all its pre-

tensions to fitness for a villa residence: but this exact symmetry, though it seems essential for a temple, or any large public building, the principal use of which is to assemble great masses of men in one room, is not absolutely necessary when the occupants of a building are to be

lodged in different rooms; and when this is the case, the Grecian style is as applicable to a villa as the Gothic."¹⁷

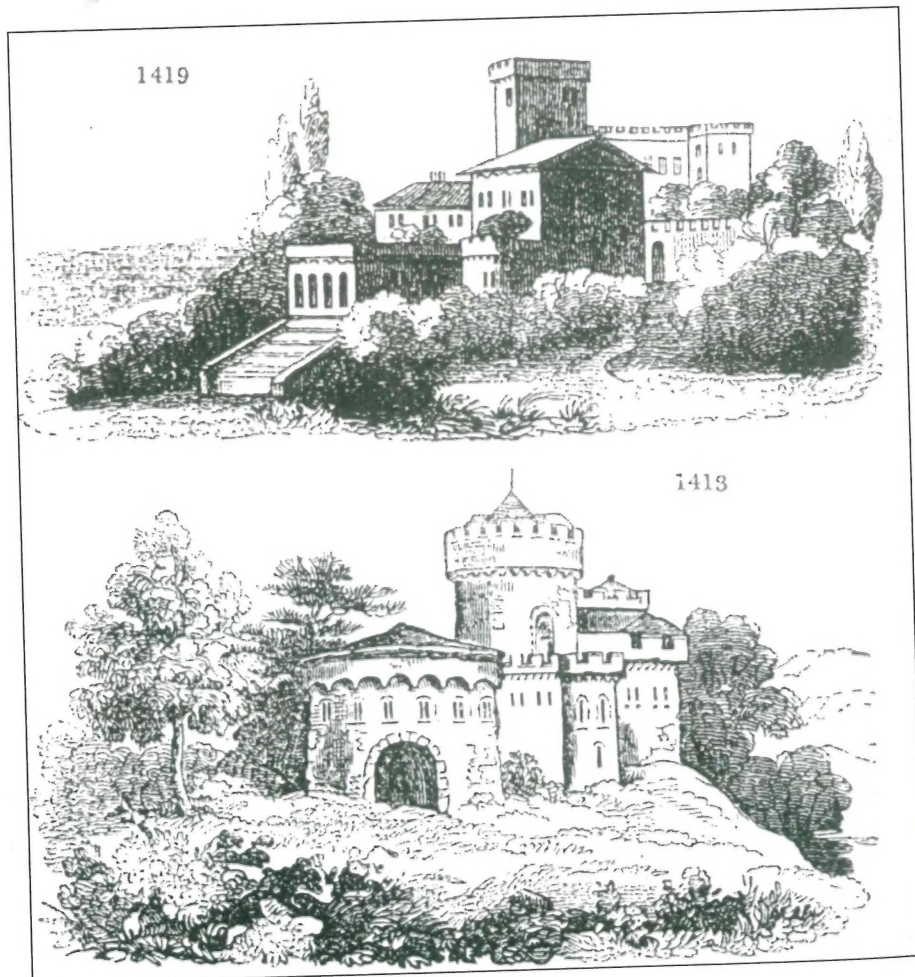
But Loudon did not illustrate any examples of asymmetrical designs for villas in the

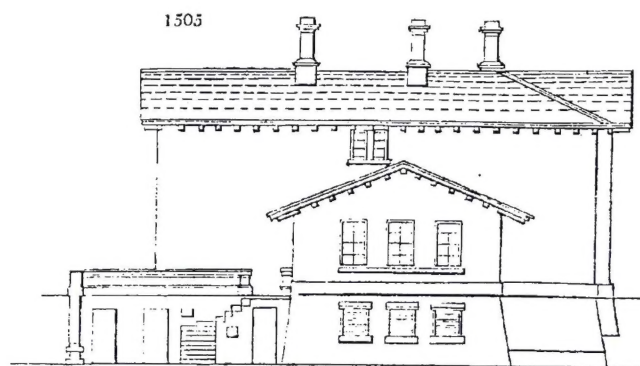
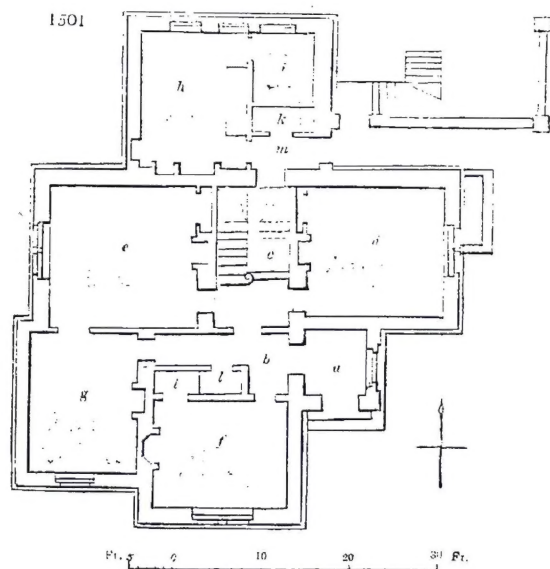
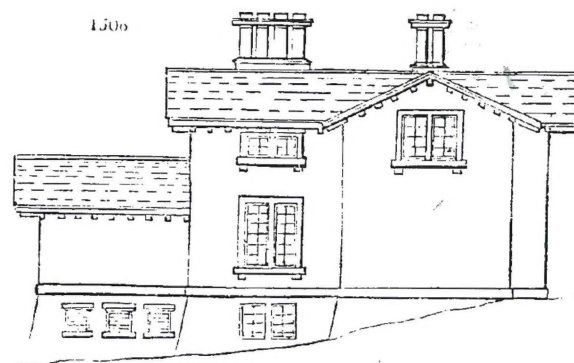
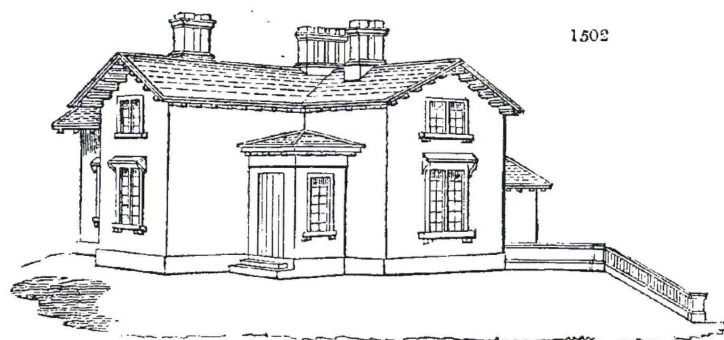
Grecian style. His most important woodcuts were probably the examples of truly Picturesque buildings taken directly from paintings by Claude and Poussin, Raphael and Titian which he had cribbed from

G.L. Meason's book on *Italian Landscape Architecture* published in 1827; these provided object lessons in irregular outlines, in the disposition of masses, and the composition of towers both square and round. After these were published examples of villas in various styles – Gothic, Elizabethan, 'Anglo-Italian' – provided by different architects. For my present purpose, perhaps the most interesting is "Design X – A Cottage Villa, showing how Advantage may be taken of a sloping Bank." This, provided by the Edinburgh architect, David Cousin, is asymmetrically massed with low-pitched roofs, generous eaves and, where the ground is lower, a basement with a pronounced batter. Such

Left: 'Irregular House' by James Thomson, from *Rural Retreats*, 1827

Below: Examples of the *Specimens of Italian Landscape Architecture*, from Loudon's *Encyclopaedia*, 1833





Perspective, plan and elevations of 'A Cottage Villa' by David Cousin, from Loudon's Encyclopaedia, 1833

features are reminiscent of some of Thomson's villas, like Craig Ailey at Kilcreggan and Tor House on Bute. Interestingly, as far as Loudon was concerned, this "plain" design by Cousin was "in no particular style."¹⁸

Thomson's early villas, notably Craig Ailey and The Knowe in Pollokshields, are essentially in the Italianate manner of villa design and are asymmetrically grouped around a belvedere or tower. They belong firmly in the tradition charted by Loudon and exemplified by the villas designed by such architects as P.F. Robinson at Edensor and Decimus Burton at Tunbridge Wells, amongst many others. It is when Thomson abandoned this round-arched style for his characteristic abstracted trabeated manner that something novel occurs – a shift that led him to produce a type of villa that was without precedent. This seems first to have occurred at Rockland at Helensburgh in about 1854. As Thomson's biographer, Ronald McFadzean, observed, "Rockland is the first villa in which Thomson clearly broke free from the Italian Romanesque [*sic*] and cottage orné styles which had dominated all of his earlier domestic work."¹⁹

Then followed the Double Villa, that supremely brilliant composition of symmetrical bi-axial asymmetry predicated upon the unprecedented manner of uniting two identical dwellings; and then Holmwood, his finest single villa. McFadzean certainly recognised that Thomson achieved something new here; that although the L-shaped plan was developed from his earlier villas, "it is the Grecian character and unusual features such as the cupola to the tower and the long horizontal wall linked to the coachman's house which contribute to the overpowering impression of profound originality... Pugin had shown the relationship that should exist between the appearance and the function of a building and this was also one of the significant aspects of Thomson's design... Admittedly, his design was based on the principles and structure of Greek architecture coupled to the picturesque qualities of the Italian Romanesque style, but he had forged his own interpretation of modern architecture."²⁰

But even McFadzean, in his determination to see Thomson "poised on the brink of a 'modern' architecture," perhaps failed sufficiently to emphasise the uniqueness of Thomson's interpretation

of the language of the Greeks – that he had created an asymmetrical Neo-Classical villa in which the exquisitely balanced irregularity of the composition was determined both by a picturesque aesthetic and by an interest in a clearly articulated rational expression governed by orderly Classical principles. It was this very rare and special quality which Gildard recognised when he described Holmwood as being "at once classic and picturesque."

If my assessment of the true originality of Thomson's villa design is correct, then the book, *Villa and Cottage Architecture*, in which both Holmwood and the Double Villa were so seductively and precisely illustrated, surely acquires even greater significance. For the Blackie volume went into three editions and it is surely reasonable to assume that copies must have crossed the Atlantic as well as reaching the Antipodes. The route from Cathcart to Oak Park may be even more direct than has often been supposed.

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2. David M. Walker, 'The Development of Thomson's Style: The Scottish Background', in Gavin Stamp & Sam McKinstry, eds., *'Greek' Thomson*, Edinburgh 1994, p.40.

3. This villa is illustrated on p.23 of Philip Miller, *Decimus Burton 1800-1881. A Guide to the Exhibition of his Work*, Building Centre Trust, London 1981. Possibly Thomson knew John Britton's *Descriptive Sketches of Tunbridge Wells and the Calverley Estate* of 1832. Beckford (posthumously) published *Views of Lansdown Tower*, Bath in 1844.

4. Illustrated in Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque*, London & New York 1927, p.224.

5. For Thomson and Minard Lafever see Andor Gomme & Gavin Stamp. 'An American Forerunner?', in Gavin Stamp & Sam McKinstry, *'Greek' Thomson*, Edinburgh 1994, pp. 199-205. Mosette Broderick confirms that the villa designs by, say, A.J.Davis, A.J.Downing and Samuel Sloan as well as Lafever conform to the British pattern by having asymmetrical plans combined with Gothic or cottage elevations.

6. *Villa and Cottage Architecture*, London, Glasgow & Edinburgh, 1868, p.92.

7. H.S. Goodhart-Rendel, *English Architecture since the Regency*, London 1953, p.112. It is surely extraordinary that, in his book on *The Villa: Form and Ideology of Country Houses* [London 1990], James S. Ackerman, having discussed the Palladian



Perspective of Craig Ailey, Kilcraggan, from Villa and Cottage Architecture, 1868

villa, managed to leap from the Picturesque and A.J.Downing and the American Romantic Villa to Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier, as if nothing of significance developed in between. And even David Watkin, who discusses the Picturesque in the 19th century from Salvin to Lutyens in his 1982 book, *The English Vision: The Picturesque in Architecture, Landscape & Garden Design*, fails to refer to Thomson's villas.

8. Ian Gow, 'The Edinburgh Villa Revisited: Function not Form', in Dana Arnold, ed., *The Georgian Villa*, London 1996, p.154.

9. Ronald McFadzean, *The Life and Work of Alexander Thomson*, London 1979, p.218. The plates of the *Sammlung* appeared between 1819 and 1840, and were republished in 1843-47, 1852, 1866 and 1872.

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11. *Catalogue of the Valuable Library of the late W.H. Playfair, Esq., Architect...*, Edinburgh 1857.

12. John Summerson, 'The Vision of J.M.Gandy', in *Heavenly Mansions*, London 1949, p.123. For Gandy also see *Joseph Michael Gandy (1771-1843)*, Architectural Association, London 1982.

13. Joseph Gandy, *Designs for Cottages, Cottage Farms, and other Rural Buildings; including Entrance Gates and Lodges*, London 1805, pp.vii-viii.

14. Summerson, 'The Vision of J.M. Gandy', op. cit., pp. 119-120.

15. John Summerson, *The Life and Work of John Nash*, London 1980, pp. 41-42.

16. J.C.Loudon, *An Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm, and Villa Architecture and Furniture... A New Edition*, London 1835, pp. 792 & 763.

17. Loudon, op. cit., p.774.

18. Loudon, op. cit., p.858.

19. McFadzean, op. cit., p.42.

20. McFadzean, op. cit., pp. 112-114.

21. For that other Holmwood in Adelaide, South Australia, see the Alexander Thomson Society Newsletter N°14, December 1995.

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Ian Gow at the National Monuments Record for Scotland and Mosette Broderick in New York kindly offered valuable advice during the preparation of this article.

The author will be glad to learn from readers of any other possible precedents for Holmwood.

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